



Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait Drawing at a Window*, 1648.

JAMES A. W. HEFFERNAN

## Cracking the Mirror: *Self-Representation in Literature and Art*

*What else can you call painting but a similar embracing with art  
of what is presented on the surface of the water in the fountain?*

Leon Battista Alberti on a painting of Narcissus,  
*De Pictura* (1435)

ARE MIRRORS the fountains of art? Before the invention of photography in the 1840s, the only way an artist could produce a recognizable likeness of himself was to paint his own reflection – “embracing [it] with art,” as Alberti said. The act of doing so could be called the ground level of self-representation. In a 1648 etching by Rembrandt, for instance, the 42-year-old artist draws what he presumably sees in the mirror before him. Unadorned by any of the finery we so often see in his other self-portraits, uncoloured by any of their flamboyance or dramatic flair, he sits at his table by a window practising his craft as an etcher of pictures such as this. Here, writes H. Perry Chapman, an authority on Rembrandt’s self-portraits, “he radically redefine(s) his self.” Abandoning “the role of gentleman-virtuoso,” he portrays himself

as an artist in the studio, autonomous in his professional identity.... No longer play-acting, he sits at a table drawing probably with an etcher’s needle on a plate. No longer elegantly costumed, he wears his mundane studio smock and a prosaic, middle-class hat, which brings to mind the ‘freedom hat’ widely used as a symbol of Dutch liberty in political allegories of the independence of the Netherlands.... In 1648 the Treaty of Munster finally ended the war with Spain, bringing official recognition to Dutch independence ...<sup>1</sup>

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Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait with Saskia*, 1634.

Chapman's point is well taken. Rembrandt's simple hat and smock reinforce the authenticity of the picture as a window on a particular time of Rembrandt's life, at a crucial year in Dutch history, and on a particular moment of his working day: even the hour can be approximately gauged from the angle of the light slanting through the window. "This is just what the mirror reflected," writes Halla Beloff, a psychologist.

He is not dressed for an exotic never-land. The window places him mundanely in his house. The work is openly revealed, and so, we feel, is the artist.... What we see is a serious craftsman, indeed hard at work, a frown of concentration between his eyes. He examines himself. He is not interested in manipulating our view of him; he is not interested in us.... This is how he was ...<sup>2</sup>

Relatively speaking, Chapman and Beloff are right. In the 1648 etching, Rembrandt represents his working life far more realistically than he does in *Self-Portrait with Saskia* (1634), where he poses as an overdressed playboy. On the other hand, one suspects, this painting more faithfully captures the spirit of Rembrandt's shirking life, the mood of gaiety and abandon with which he might well have celebrated his new marriage – especially at a time when his growing success gave him the means to do so. But leaving aside such speculation, does the etching give us exactly what the mirror reflected, as Beloff claims? The answer is no, not unless its reflections came only in black and white. In this respect, at least, the flagrantly theatrical painting is more realistic. If we resist that idea, it is only or chiefly because we associate the tonal sobriety of the print with understatement, with restraint, and therefore with honesty – the uncoloured truth. But how much truth does a black-and-white etching tell about a coloured reflection? How well does Rembrandt's rich chiaroscuro and delicate cross-hatching duplicate it? This is just one of the many questions raised by the claim that any picture perfectly duplicates what the artist saw when he or she created it – in the mirror or anywhere else.

When Beloff claims that Rembrandt's etching is "just what the mirror reflected," we have absolutely no way of verifying this claim, no independent access to that mirror and not even any guarantee that he was looking at one. As we look at the etching, the eyes of Rembrandt look searchingly at something we cannot see, something outside the picture but so clearly occupying the place of the viewer that he seems to be looking at us. We find ourselves in this position whenever we look at a picture of the artist at work and facing us – as in Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656), painted just a few years later than Rembrandt's etching. Here the back of the painter's canvas blocks our access to the image on it while the framed couple in the background hint at what he might be looking at – but only if we construe the couple as the reflection of a couple standing outside the painting – just where we stand to view it. In that case, of course, what the painter sees before him has nothing to do with the painting we see here. Even if





Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas* (detail), 1656.

Opposite: Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait in a Cap, Open-mouthed*, 1630.

we construe the framed couple as figures in a painting *within* the painting rather than as a reflection, and even if we imagine that the painter works before a mirror large enough to reflect everything that we now see in the painting, including himself, we cannot help occupying the space targeted by his gaze, and thus feeling that we somehow occlude at least part of what the mirror reflects. In any case, the painting does not represent the painter in action – applying a brush to his canvas – but rather holding it steady, posing before a canvas we cannot see. To see his reflection in a mirror, the painter must look away from his canvas, just as the etcher must look away from his plate. He cannot simultaneously do his work and duplicate the mirror’s reflection of his doing it.

In the etching, Rembrandt looks up from his plate. Do the compressed lips, the lowered double chin, the steady eyes, and the creased forehead express the mood of concentration with which he is working, or do they join to form just one more expression assumed for the mirror, taking its place with others such as that of *Self-Portrait in a Cap, Open-mouthed* (1630)? Here the pursed lips and canted eyebrows and wide staring eyes seem theatrical or comic and hence unrealistic only if we believe – as Lessing decreed – that visual art should represent nothing transitory, no fleeting expression; only if we believe that the “real” Rembrandt – beneath and behind all that trumpery and posturing and mugging we see elsewhere – habitually kept his mouth neatly shut, his brow tensed, and his gaze unwaveringly firm. Even if that were true, can we ignore the signs of artifice in this work, such as the window that not only gives the picture its artfully composed light but also reminds us of Alberti’s master trope for painting: visible forms enclosed by a window frame?<sup>3</sup> Besides that, the strip of blind





Rembrandt,  
*Self-Portrait  
Open-mouthed,  
as if Shouting*,  
1630.

Opposite:  
Rembrandt,  
*Christ on the  
Cross*, 1631.

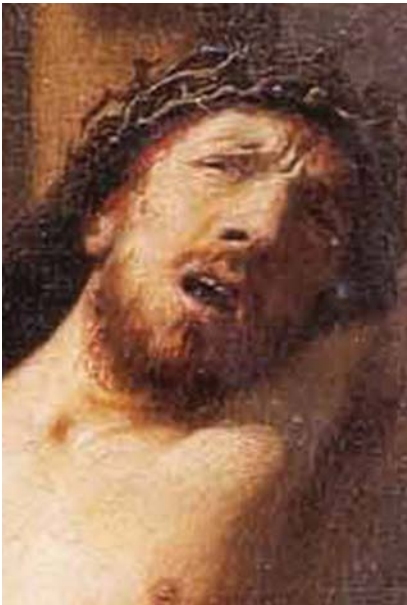
just below the top of the window shows us something Rembrandt could certainly not have seen in his mirror, for here he has signed his name and inscribed the date of the etching. To study this etching is to see the impossibility of ever closing the gap between self and self-representation in visual art, between the artist who wields the brush or etching tool and the artist who poses, between a living body – even when reflected in the mirror – and a depicted or delineated one.

I stress this point because a comparable gap separates the writing self from the written self in the literature of autobiography, whether fictionalized or not. Consider the opening stanza of the third canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron's autobiographical travelogue in verse. Having written two cantos about his travels around the Mediterranean in 1810–11, when he was in his early twenties, he now records his embarkation from England in late April of 1816, two months after being decisively separated from his wife. He begins by apostrophizing their infant daughter Ada, who has been taken by his estranged wife and whom he will never see again:

Is thy face like thy mother's, my fair child!  
Ada! sole daughter of my house and heart?  
When last I saw thy young blue eyes they smiled,  
And then we parted, – not as now we part,  
But with a hope. –

Awaking with a start,  
The waters heave around me; and on high  
The winds heave up their voices: I depart,  
Whither I know not; but the hour's gone by,  
When Albion's lessening shores could grieve or glad mine eye.<sup>4</sup>

We have here almost a picture made with words, a typographical image of separation. The stanza breaks precisely in the middle, graphically signifying two kinds of rupture: the wrenching separation of the speaker from his daughter, which assumes a painful finality when compared with a previous parting, and the sudden experience of waking up, which decisively breaks the mood of reverie established in the first half of the stanza. Nevertheless, even as it represents rupture, the stanza demands to be seen and read as a whole. It begins and ends in a present tense that consumes nostalgia, that denies the emotional impact of the fissure between past and present, that defiantly asserts the speaker's indifference to the very act of parting: "I depart, / Whither I know not; but the hour's gone by, / When Albion's lessening shores [the shores of England, that is] could grieve or glad mine eye."



The speaker's determination to deny the very split which this stanza so graphically reveals is reinforced by the mode of narration here. If we read Byron's stanza innocently, as if for the first time, we cannot know that its first four and a half lines express a mood of reverie until we learn that the speaker has been jolted awake. Only then are we asked to believe that the lines we have just read have not been uttered by an already awakened speaker at the moment when he actually leaves his daughter ("as now we part"), but rather have been spoken or somehow written





Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait at the Age of 34*, 1640.

in a dream. The second half of the stanza then implies something only a little less likely: that a dreamer could not only start speaking at the instant of awakening but also instantly transcribe his speech in verse, scribbling a Spenserian stanza on the deck of a pitching ship. Byron thus exposes the illusion as such in the very act of generating it. Even as he tries to close the gap between the experiencing self and the writing self, between the dreaming voyager suddenly jolted awake and the poet deliberately shaping a stanza, he is forced to disclose it.

Byron's poem exemplifies two features common to self-representation in art as well as in literature: first, the impossibility of mirroring one's life exactly at any one moment, and second the inevitability of role-playing. Even if we discount the would-be "fictitious" figure of Harold, Byron's eponymous hero, we are left with the dramatized poet and the travelling narrator, the highly self-conscious creator and the wandering self – the wandering *I* – that he creates. Since the word *personality* springs from the Latin word for mask (*persona*), we might treat both of these personalities as masks for Byron's "real" self. But to think we can find his real self – his bedrock self – by stripping away the masks of the poem is like imagining that we can find the real Rembrandt by stripping off all of his costumes, rejecting all of his poses, dismissing all of the ways in which he depicts himself. Difficult as it may be to grapple with the trio of selves that Byron generates in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, doing so may help us to grapple with the daunting number of self-portraits painted and drawn by Rembrandt – more than ninety in all.

"Why so many?" is the question repeatedly asked. The usual answer is that Rembrandt's self-portraits are acts of self-promotion. While displaying his likeness, they also demonstrate his virtuosity, advertise his social status, and proclaim the dignity of his profession. But only a small number of his self-portraits cast him in a truly dignified light. Among the sober-sided burghers of Amsterdam, what did he gain by presenting himself as a playboy in the picture with Saskia, where even she seems slightly disapproving? And what did he gain by etching himself as a beggar a few years earlier, in 1630? This could hardly serve as the public face of an ambitious young artist, even though it may have expressed something of the way he felt at the time he produced it.

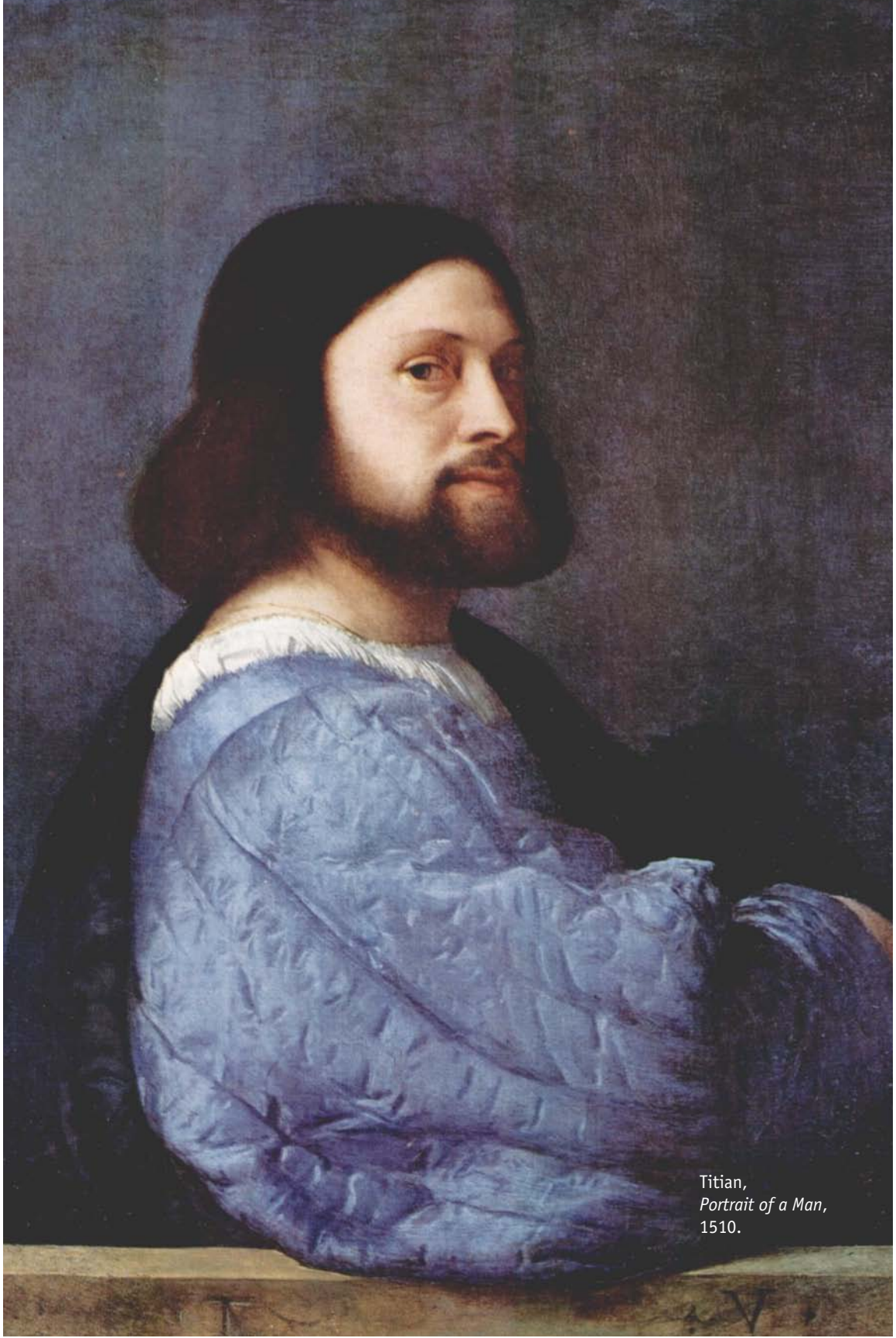
To set the variety of Rembrandt's self-portraits beside the multiplicity of roles played by an autobiographical "self" such as Byron or Rousseau is to see that artists and writers alike continually engage in a heightened version of everyday self-presentation, of the acting we do

with each other to shape our personalities for social ends. But Rembrandt shaped his personality for artistic ends. He drew and painted his pictures almost as if staging a play. He chose his sets, costumes, and lighting for theatrical effect, and he used himself – his own face and body – to explore the expressive possibilities of art, its capacity to represent what Alberti called “the movement of [the] soul” in each of its figures.<sup>5</sup> In drawing himself as a screaming lout (*Self-Portrait Open-mouthed, as if Shouting*, 1630), is he representing a personal moment of anguish or preparing himself to paint the agonized face of *Christ on the Cross* (1631)? We cannot split the life of the man from the life of the painter. Even the apparently clear distinction between a picture of himself as someone else – such as St Paul – and a picture of himself “as himself” gets complicated when he assumes a recognizable pose. In his elegant *Self-Portrait at the Age of 34* (1640), for instance, his way of resting his arm plainly evokes Titian’s *Portrait of a Man* (1510), in London’s National Gallery.

Whether posing as himself or as someone else, he could not pose at all without playing a role, but always a role that expressed some fraction of his identity as an artist and thereby shaped the self he was presenting. Writing in the late 1760s, Jean-Jacques Rousseau begins his *Confessions* with the words, “je forme.” “I am forming,” he writes, the inimitable and unprecedented story of myself. It will include the shameful as well as the noble, he promises, and he does indeed confess to such things as exposing his private parts to young women in dark alleys, abandoning a friend in need, and falsely accusing a servant girl of theft. Nevertheless, Rousseau forms and shapes his narrative to contrapose the best and worst features of his character, and to highlight the crucial stages of his life, as when Book I ends with his fateful departure from Geneva at the age of sixteen.

Does Rembrandt likewise shape the story of his life in his self-portraits? I venture to say no. The familiar claim that Rembrandt’s self-portraits add up to an autobiography simply will not survive close scrutiny, especially when we compare them to the more or less coherent and comprehensive narratives wrought by literary autobiographers such as Rousseau. The portraits do indeed show Rembrandt growing older: from the round, smooth face of youthful intensity and shadowed, penetrating eyes through the joyous years with Saskia and the sobriety of middle age to the majesty of old age, white hair, and a face creased by wisdom born of suffering and pain. But do any of Rembrandt’s self-portraits reveal the genesis of his pain? Does any





Titian,  
*Portrait of a Man*,  
1510.





A family photograph reproduced in Orhan Pamuk's 2005 memoir *Istanbul*.

one of them show him mourning the death of Saskia in 1642, or the infant deaths of three of their four children, or the loss of his house in 1660 after bankruptcy forced him out of it? At best, the portraits illustrate a story that must be constructed from the verbal record of Rembrandt's life. To make the portraits alone yield an autobiographical narrative is to imagine – for instance – that from 1629 to 1631 Rembrandt somehow lurched from the elegance of a Renaissance courtier to the desperation of beggary and back again to prosperity – all in less than two years' time.

Time itself makes the crucial difference between self-portraiture and autobiography. When Rembrandt looked in the mirror at any time of his life, all he could see was his then-present self. He could dress as he pleased; he could pose as a saint or a beggar or a courtier or a plain old etcher working at his desk. But he could not – or would not – change the age of the face that looked back at him. If we seek a literary analogue for Rembrandt's self-portraits, therefore, they sug-

gest not so much the chapters of an autobiography as the pages of a diary – so long as we recognize that they seldom record the daily facts of Rembrandt’s life and that each is shaped as a work of art. What does Rembrandt reveal in his self-portrait with Saskia in 1635, one year into their marriage? That he was a happy husband with an imposing house, revelling in all the costly furnishings and costumes and food and drink that his newly acquired wealth could buy? That he was a wild drinker? Or – hidden in plain sight – that he was a brilliantly theatrical painter capable of staging this scene (note the drawn curtains at right), catching the tone and texture of its many fabrics, placing the raised glass as if it were an elevated host, and geometrically linking the contrasted figures – one sitting, one standing, one abandoned, one prim – with the half-circle of the man’s draped arm? In pictures such as these, Rembrandt not only marks the stages of his life but also the development of his style, of his life as an artist.

For this very reason, we have only to imagine this scene re-constructed by the sixty-year-old Rembrandt to see the difference between autobiography and self-portraiture.

The autobiographer brings to the task of re-creating his or her past all that he or she has learned or experienced in the meantime – in life or in the art of writing. If the sixty-year-old Rembrandt were to re-create the period represented by this picture of himself with Saskia, it would look drastically different from this – just as the steamy life of a teenager in the fleshpots of ancient Carthage looked drastically less appetizing in retrospect to the spiritually regenerated man he became. Writing at the end of the fourth century of our era, long before Rousseau, Saint Augustine begins Book 3 of his *Confessions* (long before Rousseau’s) by recalling his hyper-sexed adolescence: “I came to Carthage,” he writes, “where a cauldron of illicit loves leapt and boiled about me. I was not yet in love, but I was in love with love, and from the very depth of my need hated myself for not more keenly feeling the need.... Within I was hungry, all for the want of that spiritual food which is Thyself, my God.”<sup>6</sup> The teenage, pagan, half-educated, irrepressibly hormonal Augustine could not possibly have portrayed himself in these terms. Only the mature, spiritually disciplined, rhetorically sophisticated Christian that he became could manage the sort of brushwork required to set his youthful self within a framework of ultimate redemption.

Autobiography stages an ongoing negotiation between past and present, between the remembered self and the remembering self, between the life once lived and the task of reconstructing that life in

words. Memory never seals the gap between them. In *Istanbul*, his recent autobiographical portrait of an ancient city, the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk juxtaposes photographs of his boyhood self with his mature reflections on them. Which is the more exact reflection – the photograph of the boy or the words of the man? From the photograph of himself and his brother with his parents at a wedding, for instance, we might guess that the little boy at lower left grew up – almost literally – in the lap of a happy family. Only his unsmiling mouth and the restless tilt of his body and his sidelong glance at something outside the frame hint of what the boy came to know and the man reconstructs. “If ever evil encroached,” he writes,

if boredom loomed, my father’s response was to turn his back on it and remain silent. My mother, who set the rules, was the one to raise her eyebrows and instruct us in life’s darker side. If she was less fun to be with, I was still very dependent on her love and attention, for she gave us far more time than did our father, who seized every opportunity to escape from the apartment. My harshest lesson in life was to learn I was in competition with my brother for my mother’s affections.<sup>7</sup>

How much of this accurately represents what the boy felt – but obviously could not articulate – at the moment the photograph was taken? We have no way of knowing because no autobiographer can directly access his earlier self, can see it without the intervention and interference of his present thoughts, feelings, and language. The writer of an autobiography always sees himself through veils of time. He never looks directly in the mirror.

Can visual art do anything like this? Can a self-portraitist re-create only what he finds in the mirror as he paints, or can he somehow look back through the lens of time at his younger self? Consider the possibilities. Ever since the invention of photography, artists have been free to re-create old photographs of their younger selves, and doubtless some have done so (though I can think of no examples). But before photography, could the self-portrait of a young painter be discernibly stamped with any sign that it had been painted by an old one, remembered by the grand old man, re-viewed by him? Could it bear such a sign while remaining recognizably young? Or must we conclude that time alone could make its mark on the face of a painter, that he could signify its effect only by showing how it has actually aged him, as Rembrandt does in a late self-portrait – *Self-Portrait at the Age of 63*



Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait at the Age of 63*, 1669.





J.M.W. Turner,  
*Light and Colour – The Morning after the Deluge – Moses Writing the Book of Genesis*, 1843.

(1669), now at London's National Gallery – that deliberately repeats the pose of a much earlier one – *Self-Portrait at the Age of 34* (1640).

On the other hand, if painting has the power to signify, not just to simulate, painters can represent themselves in ways that go far beyond anything they might see of themselves in a mirror. Take for instance J.M.W. Turner, probably the greatest painter that England ever produced. After producing just one self-portrait in oils at the start of his career in the late 1790s, Turner painted himself no more. But he subtly puts himself into several of his later paintings, such as *Light and Colour – The Morning after the Deluge – Moses Writing the Book of Genesis*. This is a painting about verbal and visual representation, and the role that each one plays in signifying rather than simulating events that we could not possibly see for ourselves. In the verses that Turner himself wrote about this picture, the humanoid bubbles thrown up by the receding waters at lower right are called “ephemeral as the summer fly, which rises, flits, expands, and dies.” Moses of course was not around at the time of the deluge. Yet the deluge exists for us only as an event that he first represented in a script that has endured far longer than the ephemeral bubbles. Re-creating the deluge in words, Moses also signifies Turner himself, the prophet who rewrites Moses' words in colour and light, and whose paintings – especially his late works – typically manifest the emergence of a shaping vision from what looks like primordial chaos. Just above the centre of the painting, the figure of Moses writing the Book of Genesis stands for Turner at work, regenerating the myth of the Deluge in such a way as to make us see how fully the myth depends on the writer who first created it and the painter who now re-creates it. Turner even insinuates himself into the double turn or overturning of the serpent. Caught in the act of writing, Moses signifies a painter who writes with a brush, a painter looking out from the centre of what is at once a sun, a gigantic bubble, and an all-seeing eye.

Once painters look beyond the mirror, they may find themselves in figures ranging from an ancient prophet to a little girl. Painted in 1994 by the South African-born Marlene Dumas, who now works in the Rembrandtian city of Amsterdam, *The Painter* depicts the artist's five- or six-year-old daughter Helena at more than life size – the painting is over six feet tall. With her daunting height, her forbidding expression, and her hands dyed red and black, she could almost be taken for an *enfant terrible à la* Lady Macbeth, fresh from steeping her fingers in the blood and bile of a luckless playmate. But since the painting is

called *The Painter*, it clearly signifies an artist. Overturning the traditional relation between the male artist and the female model, Dumas gives her daughter the main role. “She painted herself,” Dumas has said. “The model becomes the artist.” But in fact it is Dumas *mère* who has done the painting here, representing herself – or signifying herself – as a naked little girl fearlessly remaking or woman-handling the world in red and black.

**S**ELF-PORTRAITURE differs from autobiography in many ways. Though nothing keeps an artist from re-creating a photograph of his or her younger self, and thus re-viewing that self in retrospect, artists seldom (if ever) make this move, and not even the ninety-plus self-portraits of Rembrandt deliver anything like a coherent or comprehensive story of his life. But to see how artists and writers represent themselves is to see how they each crack the mirror paradigm of self-representation. Art as well as literature manifests the impossibility of perfectly reflecting one’s life at any moment, the inevitability of self-dramatization, and the periodic necessity of self-signification: portraying oneself in ways that look nothing at all like what the mirror reflects.

## Notes

- 1 H. Perry Chapman, *Rembrandt by Himself* (Glasgow: Glasgow Museums and Galleries, 1990), pp. 19–21.
- 2 Halla Beloff, in *Rembrandt by Himself*, p. 31.
- 3 Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, 1435.
- 4 George Gordon Byron, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Canto the Third, I.
- 5 Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, 1435.
- 6 Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.1.
- 7 Orhan Pamuk, *Istanbul* (New York: Knopf, 2005), p. 16.



Marlene Dumas, *The Painter*, 1994